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# The Uyghurs of China: A Struggle of Past, Present, and Future

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## OSWALD AWARDS SECOND PLACE – HUMANITIES: CREATIVE



With a population of more than ten million, Uyghurs are a major ethnic group in China's northwestern Xinjiang province. Although their specific lineage is notably disputed, the Uyghurs most likely descend from peoples who inhabited lands from modern-day Mongolia westward. Their Islamic faith is evidence of contact with Middle Eastern merchants who traveled along the trade routes of the Silk Road, which runs directly through northwestern China. The time period during which they settled in Xinjiang also remains unclear, but Uyghurs were already firmly rooted in the region by the time of the Qing Dynasty conquest in 1759 (Bovingdon, 2010: 26). They share common cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions with the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, and have generally resisted rule by Han Chinese. Nonetheless, Beijing has staked a relentless claim to the region and its resources (at least one-third of the country's oil and gas), backed by a firm belief that Xinjiang has always been a part of China.

In response to 2009 Uyghur riots in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang, China's president Hu Jintao stressed the importance of "properly handling development and stability" in the region. He assured his people that the government "attaches great importance to the well-being of ethnic groups", but warned that such crimes "masterminded by separatist forces at home and abroad" would not be tolerated (CNN.com, 2009). Despite Hu's accusations, however, most conflict between Uyghurs and Hans in the province can be traced to Uyghurs' more simple political concerns, such as a lack of representation in government. Whether or not the riots of 2009 were backed by separatist forces, they are clear evidence of the Uyghurs' dissatisfaction with their current circumstances.

My research examines the nature of both the Han rule in Xinjiang and the Uyghur

reaction to it. I look at issues regarding Beijing's attitude toward the Uyghurs as well as the scope of the conflict. China's government has employed a matrix of covert and overt policies in an attempt to manipulate the situation. Specifically, I will discuss the roles of Xinjiang's political structure, religious oppression, and linguistic policy in the integration of the region into China's globalized economy.

Studying Xinjiang's present situation requires a substantial, often daunting framework. In comparison to their southerly Tibetan neighbors, Uyghurs have received little international recognition. Further, what little attention Uyghurs have received has often been negative, due primarily to Beijing's depiction of ordinary conflicts in Xinjiang as radical Islamic movements (Bovingdon, 2010: 105-134). Their international spotlight peaked in 2001 with the arrest of eighteen innocent Uyghurs mistaken for Taliban fighters while traveling across Afghanistan (BBC News, 2007). Beijing took this opportunity to convince the American government to add the primarily Uyghur "Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement" to its list of terrorist organizations, despite a lack of evidence and the obscure nature of the group (Dwyer, 2005: 51; Bovingdon, 2010: 40-79). The hapless Uyghurs were released from Guantanamo in 2002, but by that time it was clear that events in Xinjiang would carry weight worldwide. For China, mishandling of its Muslim populations could mean shaky economic relations with oil-rich nations in the Middle East (Haider, 2005: 544). The United States, still fighting its war on terror, maintains vigilance on the area while regarding it as a potential breeding ground for radical Islamism. The American government must simultaneously recognize that its political relationship with China could very well dictate Uyghur sentiment toward the United States. Thus, the nature of the relationship between the Uyghurs and the CCP (Communist Party of China) will influence several trends, from American interest in the region to China's foreign

energy supply.

The origin of those issues still causing Uyghur discontent today can be traced to the 1949 victory in China of the communists over the republican Guomindang Party (GMD). With the vision of a more unified nation under communist rule, the CCP clamped down on minority ethnic groups from the very start. The communist government's labeling of the province as the "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region" is both an attempt to appease Uyghur nationalism and a gross misnomer. In general, an autonomous region enjoys "local control of media and educational organs" as well as the support of the state to "help protect the distinct identity of the titular group" (Bovingdon, 2004: 4). The Uyghurs of Xinjiang have neither. Beginning with the mandatory immigration of Hans into the province, the CCP has strategically and continuously shifted regional power from Uyghurs to Hans (Bovingdon, 2010: 40-79). In addition to ordering Han immigration, Beijing created and maintained the Production and Construction Corps, bands of demobilized soldiers assigned to populate and farm unstable areas, namely borderlands. In 1949, Uyghurs constituted ninety percent of the province's population; today they are a mere forty-five percent, and at all times have been severely underrepresented in politics. Moreover, Beijing not only handpicks the most docile Uyghur politicians to serve in government, but also assigns them the task of announcing unpopular policies to the masses. The result has been a steady Han appropriation of control over the region's most important institutions (Bovingdon, 2010: 40-79). Whereas Western scholars argue that it is precisely this lack of influence in government that causes so much Uyghur unrest, Beijing insists that Islamic radicalism and separatism are behind all Uyghur uprisings.

In order to maintain its claims that Uyghur culture and religion is backwards, the CCP utilizes control over the local government in Xinjiang to create and manipulate

religious and linguistic policies. Ostensibly, the policies imposed on the Uyghurs function to promote the overall stability of the region. Covertly, however, Beijing intends for repression of religion and linguistic assimilation to quash any sense of Uyghur identity (Dwyer, 2005: 6). Although active laws have changed with conditions in the region, they have retained the common goal of hindering the passage of religion from one generation to another. At one point laws forbade anyone under the age of eighteen to enter a mosque (Bovingdon, 2010: 71). Similarly, the CCP actively promotes the image of *Putonghua* (standard Chinese language regulated by the Communist party) as a dynamic language, ignoring the status of the Uyghur language as a lingua franca among other minority ethnic groups (Dwyer, 2005: 13). The government has carried out the promotion of the Chinese language primarily by mandating bilingual education beginning in Kindergarten. A recent China Daily article concluded that "bilingual education will help bridge communication divides among people in Xinjiang" ([chinadaily.com.cn](http://chinadaily.com.cn)). However, bilingual education has not been effective in teaching English to minority students, as it requires them to learn the language by means of Chinese. Arienne Dwyer contends that the vocabularies and orthographies of Turkic languages are in fact much closer to English than Chinese (Dwyer, 2005: 42). It is not surprising, then, that minority students struggle to learn English in a Chinese classroom. Beijing continues to assert control by implementing and actively enforcing questionable policies in Xinjiang, justifying them with promises of eventual equality and stability.

Another tool the Chinese government utilizes to preserve its control is the relentless advertising of its vision to develop Xinjiang with foreign investment and efficient markets.

It has become commonplace for officials in Beijing to justify unpopular policies with the notion that they promote the economic development of the region. They point to the construction of the Karakoram Highway between Islamabad and Kashgar as proof that the government has already invested substantial funds to that end (Haider, 2005: 524). The highway, constructed in 1982 during a time of relative freedom in Xinjiang, originally allowed Uyghurs to travel westward to Pakistan and beyond, but the CCP began to fear the spread of Islamic nationalist ideas to Xinjiang and tightened its control later in the decade. Today, Pakistani businessmen constitute most of the traffic entering Xinjiang. Much to the demise of the Uyghur population, Pakistanis in Xinjiang view the Uyghurs less as Muslim brothers and more as a burden on their business interests in the region (Haider, 2005: 538). As a result, Uyghurs not only continue to feel exploited by the Han government, but also feel abandoned by their Islamic neighbors.

The Uyghurs' sense of isolation from the rest of the Islamic world, coupled with the pacific nature of their Sufi Muslim faith, seems to debunk Beijing's contention that all Uyghur uprisings in Xinjiang are religious and separatist in nature. Numerous third-party scholars insist that rather than desiring a separate nation of their own, Uyghurs are simply unsatisfied with their underrepresentation in government and the overall lack of respect shown to their culture (Haider, 2005: 524). Thus, the Chinese government's labeling of all resistance as separatist in nature is an absurd exaggeration. After an extended study conducted in Xinjiang, Gardner Bovingdon inferred that most dissent takes the form of "everyday resistance" (Bovingdon, 2010: 80-104). Hints at contempt are prevalent, albeit subtle, in Uyghur poems, songs, and everyday speech. This stealthy form of disapproval aids Uyghurs in maintaining their identity in ways that are difficult to punish. Even so, Han police frequently

detain Uyghur entertainers for alleged dissent. Government security forces in Xinjiang make several political arrests during the annual "Strike Hard Campaign", carried out in all of China to control ordinary crime (Bovingdon, 2010: 131). Ironically, strict laws and harsh punishments could very well strengthen the Uyghur identity they are designed to smother (Haider, 2005: 544). Beijing's harsh policies may be more a cause of conflict than a solution.

As China emerges as an economic and political superpower, its government seeks to integrate their communist society into a capitalist world economy. The handling of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang is only one of a number of questions facing Chinese authorities today. This particular issue is much more complex than China would like to admit, nonetheless, as a thorough analysis of the issues must draw from several fields of study. Unfortunately, much of the information presented by Chinese and Uyghur sources is so biased as to be utterly unreliable. Both sides have constructed a vision of history that best suits their current political objectives; they have molded history into a political tool for the justification of their actions. Further, the contraction of time and space through globalization mandates the "rapid accommodation" of all minority populations in China (Gladney, 2003: 467). Processes and trends that once took years to develop are now happening in a matter of weeks. The Chinese government intends to control these processes at home while constructing and maintaining a positive image internationally. Uyghur resistance has been a roadblock to its smooth transition into the globalized world, and China is working to push it out of the way.

Now more than ever, the Uyghurs are at a crucial point in their struggle for recognition and respect. History has shown that nations tend to place their desires for wealth and political expansion above the rights of their minority peoples, often leading to violence. Instances abound: Sudan, Indonesia, Chechnya; however, modern day technology

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increasingly brings governments under the scruples of the rest of the world. The Internet has indeed altered the playing field, as events taking place in remote areas like Xinjiang become more and more accessible to the average person. A simple search on YouTube brings up videos of violent encounters between Uyghurs and Hans, but things become more complicated at the geopolitical level. In an increasingly globalized world, how much will the dignity and cultural values of minority peoples matter when commodities and trade are at stake?



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